

Classroom-based Language Assessment: The Case of TAFL

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There was a 92% increase in the number of Arabic as Foreign Language (AFL) programs in the US between 1998 and 2002 (Wells, 2004), and in the past 10 years this trend has continued. However, this surge has not yet been met by an equally rapid activity in the field of Teaching Arabic as Foreign Language (TAFL). One particularly under-researched area is classroom-based language assessment, especially in light of the diglossic nature of Arabic.

The present discussion aims to problematize the issue of classroom-based assessment in an AFL context. One major issue confronting theorists as well as practitioners is finding a clear definition of Arabic language ability in light of diglossia. A second issue has to do with training teachers to use assessment to promote learning rather than only measure students' achievement.

In order to effectively implement assessment in Arabic classrooms, a number of theoretical and practical issues need to be addressed. On the theoretical level, there is a need for a clear, operational definition of language proficiency, part of which is grammatical ability. Unlike the case for English, for instance, a model of grammatical knowledge suited to Arabic is lacking. Current models (e.g.; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Purpura, 2004) can be used as a point of departure. However, a model of Arabic grammatical knowledge should be based on second language acquisition research that takes into consideration the diglossic nature as well as other sociolinguistic aspects of Arabic. While the local dialects (such as Cairene/Egyptian or Lebanese Arabic) are used for everyday communication, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is primarily used in formal contexts such as printed media, news shows, and political or religious speeches. However, the distinction is not that simple. Badawi (1973) divided Arabic into: Heritage Classical, Contemporary Standard, Educated Spoken, Literate Spoken, and Illiterate Spoken. Speakers of Arabic code-switch between these five levels to serve different functions, and this language practice makes the task of defining language ability, especially in terms of speaking, a difficult task. This, for instance, led the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) (1987) to clearly acknowledge that "the descriptions of speaking skills, in particular at the higher levels of Advanced and Superior, do not replicate native-speaking situations," (p. 50).

On the practical level, one important area that needs particular improvement in relation to classroom assessment has to do with teacher training programs. Although there has been a growing trend towards training teachers on the use of communicative language teaching in Arabic classrooms, assessment occasions are still viewed as opportunities for pointing out students' weaknesses. Teachers should be aware of the importance of using ongoing assessments at different instruction stages in a way that promotes learning. Traditionally, assessment occasions focus on measuring students' morphosyntactic knowledge in isolation, rather than as part of communicating a meaningful message. This practice ignores other equally important aspects of linguistic ability, such as pragmatics.

Moving forward, what is needed is the articulation of a proficiency model that could, perhaps, be based on Purpura's (2004) "grammatical ability" model that focuses on form as well as meaning (both literal and implied, sociolinguistic meaning) and the selection of a language

learning heuristic such as the processing-oriented one (VanPatten, 1996) recommended by Purpura that focuses on input, restructuring, and output processes.

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